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Records show papal appointee helped run Nazi camp where pope worked

By JOAN GOULDING



LOS ANGELES -- A German banker appointed by Pope John Paul II as a Vatican adviser was an executive of the firm that ran a stone quarry where the Nazis forced the pope to work breaking rocks during World War II, documents show.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish research group seeking the removal of Herman Abs from the Vatican bank advisory board, provided transcripts Monday of testimony before a 1945 Senate subcommittee and information from a 1979 biography of Pope John Paul II.

In a report on the 'Elimination of German Resources for War,' the subcommittee of the Committee on Military Affairs stated that Abs was a member of the board of directors of Deutsche Solvay-Werke A.G., a Belgian conglomerate effectively controlled by Germany after Belgium fell in 1940.

'John Paul II, A Pictorial Biography,' published by McGraw-Hill, stated that as a young man in Nazi-occupied Poland, the pope, born Karol Wojtyla, was compelled to work breaking rocks for 'the stone quarry linked with the Solvay chemical works.'

Abs, now 81, was not a member of the Nazi party. He was investigated by the Allies after the war and was never tried for war crimes.

Abs served as chairman of a Solvay mining subsidiary, the Senate report said. It was uncertain if the pope worked at that particular company, but the quarry was run by the parent firm, of which Abs was a board member, the center said.

The center has been trying to force the Vatican to rescind the appointment of Abs, who served as chairman of the Deutsche Bank from 1940-44, charging he was a financial power behind the Third Reich who personally benefited from the expropriation of Jewish and Polish property.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, head of the center, said the link between Abs and the pope's forced labor under the Nazis will force the Vatican to act.

'This is not fresh evidence of criminal culpability against Abs,' Hier said in an interview, but 'it does strengthen the moral case against Abs. In a sense, Abs was the pope's employer.'

The Vatican informed the Wiesenthal Center last week that it was investigating the group's charges that Abs advanced the Nazi cause.

Hier said he is confident the pope was not aware of Abs' background when he appointed him to the bank advisory board. 'The pope has a record of being an outspoken critic of Naziism. He saw the persecution and slave labor and experienced it working under the Nazis. He worked for such a man.

'Does that man -- who served on the board of directors of a company that took advantage of free labor in countries they conquered -- does that person now have the credentials to serve the spiritual leader of 600 million Catholics?'

Hier said the center made the link between Abs and the pope after famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, based in Vienna, was told of the connection by a German source.

The biography, which includes a forward by the archbishop of Philadelphia, Cardinal John Krol, said the pope 'spent eight hours a day breaking up stones, out of doors, even in the bitterest cold' at the Solvay quarry.

In Nazi-occupied Poland, residents were forced to work or face being rounded up and sent to prison camps, Hier said.

In 1942, Wojtyla became a student of theology in an underground seminary while continuing to work at the Solvay factory, the biography said.

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